

The Evolving National Strategy for Victory in Iraq

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to the Sub-Committee on

National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations

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Chairman Shays, and distinguished members of the sub-committee,

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation for the opportunity to address the sub-committee on such a vital matter, and as an Iraqi American, to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your personal commitment and clear interest in helping Iraq at this critical moment. Last year, I took a leave of absence from the National Endowment for Democracy to become the spokesman for the former Iraqi prime minister, Ibrahim Jaafari. I had the pleasure of meeting you, Mr. Chairman, and many of your distinguished colleagues during your frequent visits to Baghdad. For the record, I do not oversee the Iraq program at the National Endowment for Democracy and the views I express today are mine and not those of the Endowment.

At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation and admiration to all the men and women, military and civilians, Iraqis and Americans, who are trying hard to make Iraq succeed. I have seen first hand in Baghdad the difficulties facing decision makers who have to strike an impossible balance between so many conflicting demands. With all this in mind, I want to comment on the serious efforts to help Iraqis abate violence and effectively run their country, ultimately paving the way to American troops' withdrawal. In this testimony, I will attempt to put these and other challenges ahead of us in perspective and make some recommendations.

The National Strategy for Victory in Iraq

Mr. Chairman,

We are reminded everyday that the situation in Iraq is still unfolding and that there is a long list of urgent and important challenges in Iraq, all competing for time, attention and resources. Only a clear sense of purpose and a good grasp of Iraq's reality will set clear priorities and enable us to address them in an effective way. In this respect, I want to underline the importance of the message in the National Strategy document: Victory in Iraq is a vital US interest and failure is not an option. Sustaining such a message is critical. Leaving Iraq torn with violence and sectarianism is not an option. **A failed Iraq will provide Al Qaeda the continued opportunity to become stronger, recruit more, advance its training and carry out more 9/11s.** Allowing Iraq to break down along *de facto* ethnic lines is a scenario that will sow seeds of communal and regional conflicts. Such conflicts would go on for decades and would enormously empower Al Qaeda. **Nothing less than a secure and stable Iraq will deny Al Qaeda its breeding grounds found today in chaotic bleeding cities.** May I also add that irrespective of political debates about scheduling US troops' withdrawal, Iraqi politicians realize that the US commitment is in Iraq's national interest. Failure in Iraq has dire consequences for both Iraq and the US.

By now it is obvious that **the way for a speedy US withdrawal from Iraq lies in the Iraqi people's ability to eliminate violence and effectively run their country.** The National Strategy document outlines how the US can leverage its influence to help a secure Iraq rebuild itself. The document recognizes the need to integrate efforts in three parallel tracks—political,

security and economic. While security is most urgent and obvious, political progress remains the foundation for both a lasting security and a viable economy and must be looked at carefully.

Assessing Iraqi Politics

On the positive side, Iraqis made real progress in the political process. Today, there is an inclusive elected parliament with vibrant committees and sub-committees deciding on a future Iraq. Its last national election had over 70% participation in all of its 18 provinces. The US can rightfully claim credit for facilitating Iraq's emerging political process. The December 2005 elections marked the end of the transition interim period and transferred sovereign powers to an elected parliament, which now bears legal responsibility and is fully empowered to govern. All issues, including political and communal concerns, are finding their way to parliamentary committees and subcommittees. The constitution has room for amendments, setting up new institutions, such as a senate, restructuring provinces and regions and legislating.

However, this political achievement remains fragile and under constant threat of unraveling. All stakeholders must have a closer and critical look on how to consolidate the strengths and address weaknesses of the political process. Last month, Iraqi prime minister, Nur al-Maliki, launched a reconciliation initiative to consolidate his government of national unity. He visited Gulf states to reach out for more regional support to the political process and the inclusion of Arab Sunnis. He promised that only government forces will bear arms and empowered the ministries of defense and interior, which have no ties to armed political groups and militias, to assume control. Such measures and gestures are helpful but dwarf into insignificance compared to the challenge ahead of bringing unity of vision among the three main communities in Iraq (Sunnis, Shias and Kurds) to agree on constitutional amendments.

Iraq passed the constitution in a national referendum despite Sunnis' overwhelming rejection. Only the promise and hope of future constitutional amendments brought the Sunnis back to participate in elections and in government. No committee on constitutional amendments has been formed yet. Pushing the issues without clear ideas on how to reconcile differing views might trigger a political crisis at this critical moment and deny Iraq its last chance to resolve constitutional differences. **If the minimum of Sunni hopes in amendments is not realized, then the country will sink into more violence.**

Mr. Chairman,

Differences run deep among the three major groups on nation state building. Behind their commitment to national unity are different visions on how to build Iraqi governing institutions, in particular on the nature of the state, the mandate of central government and the control of security and natural resources. Reconciliations are difficult because of hardened positions, zero-sum perspectives to politics, historical grievances, mistrust, inflated assumptions about negotiating positions and lack of experience. A closer look at their differences suggests that not all can easily or quickly be resolved. Arab Sunnis, who are most experienced in administering a central state and least in negotiating with local politicians, seek the return of a centralized Iraq with an autonomous Kurdish administrative region. Kurds, who secured a constitutionally

recognized and highly empowered federal region with a strong hold in Baghdad, will not accept any rollback from such a position. Moreover, they expect to add Kirkuk to their region. Arab Shias, with least experience in government, have mixed positions about the return of a centralized state without the Kurdish region. Some groups are pushing towards a southern federal region, similar to the Kurdish one. The parliamentary committee to be tasked with drafting amendments has not been formed yet and politicians have not brought forward new ideas on how to proceed. **The future of Kirkuk and the prospect of forming a southern region are perceived by Arab Sunnis as most problematic. At dispute are articles on the control of natural resources and the concept of citizenship and state institutions.** If Iraqis fail to agree peacefully through parliamentary daytime debates, they will fight street battles outside parliament at night.

Six months do not give politicians enough time to reconcile these differences but at least they can freeze controversial issues now and at least agree to procedures on how to reconcile conflicting visions and agendas. None of these groups can form a majority to dictate and govern alone. They need each other and they all seek US good will and support. The US can bring in additional leverage over Iraqi politics through Iraq's neighbors. To break gridlocks, the US can leverage its influence and change the dynamics of negotiations by insisting on the agreed rules rather than pushing specific outcomes.

Threats of Civil War

Fixing Iraqi politics is the most important challenge but putting down the rapidly spreading sectarian violence has become most urgent. Iraq did not have communal conflicts in its history and Iraqis pride themselves on the extent of mixed marriages and neighborhoods. For more than 3 decades, Saddam played communities against each other, elevated mistrust between citizens and caused communal tensions. Still, Iraqis blamed the government but not each other for Saddam's repression of Shias and Kurds and refused sectarianism. Some Iraqi exile leaders with external influence fed ethno-religious agendas into Iraqi politics and institutionalized sectarian quotas at all state levels. For obvious political gains, they too pushed sectarianism. That partially explains the passive slow reaction of some Iraqi political elites to growing sectarian conflicts.

Others confuse the insurgency with sectarianism. Until recently, the insurgency was the number one threat to Iraq. **Although it exploited Sunni political isolation and dysfunctional government security agencies, the insurgency failed to block the political process and the emergence of an Iraqi national unity government.** The killing of Zarqawi was a severe blow. As Al Qaeda and Saddam loyalists were running out of time, they unleashed their most devastating weapon: sectarianism. For the past three years, they have been trying without success to stir up Arab Shia-Sunni violence. They brutally beheaded Shias, blew up their mosques and destroyed their most holy shrine. Now, their fire of sectarian violence is spreading and threatening the whole process. Within Baghdad, more than 100 Shia and Sunni citizens are indiscriminately killed daily. Estimates of displaced families range between 150,000 living in tents to over a million displaced from their homes all over Iraq. These camps will inevitably be recruiting grounds for sectarian militias and criminal networks. **Sectarian violence is contagious and its rapid spread will suck in politicians and threaten the continuity of the fragile Iraqi**

unity government. The Iraqi government and parliament must come out strong in denouncing sectarianism, showing national unity and banning inflammatory statements. Also, there should be an immediate and harsh crackdown on politicians, civil servants, police and others who are involved in sectarian agitation and violence. Without a bold political stand and deterrents, Iraqi police and army units can easily get sucked into sectarian violence. If the Iraqis do not respond fast enough to put this fire down, then the US should put more pressure on them and provide critical resources to help them do so. Without it, Iraq's modest political progress and the unity of its armed forces may not survive long.

State Building

The notion of modern state institutions transcending ethno-religious lines is clearly desired and a stated policy but remains weak, if not absent, in reality. Iraqis need a central government with strong national institutions controlling arms, intelligence and borders and strong local administrations providing services and jobs. The US has provided enormous technical assistance to build Iraqi ministries and bureaus. As important as this might be, **the real predicament in state building remains in the lack of an agreed concept and an overall architecture of the state and not in technical resources.** Under current electoral rules, Iraq will always have a weak executive and a fragile coalition government, where the prime minister cannot hire and fire incompetent or corrupt ministers without causing a political crisis. It took months to form a cabinet whose success is not defined by services but by continuity. **The cabinet is formed without a shared vision but with a complex quota system dividing ministries. Inevitably, autonomous ministers are more accountable to their party bosses and less to the prime minister.**

A similar dilemma has emerged in the provinces. Iraq's decentralization plan has weakened central government to near paralysis. According to the current constitution, real power rests in regions and provinces. The Kurds set up the model—exclusive self governance in the North with an equally strong position in a weak government in Baghdad. Now southern provinces want to emulate the same model. Currently, provinces have no clear authority structure and their relationship to the center is complicated through politics. Basra is a case in point. Last year, the Ministry of Oil was allocated to a party whose power base is in Basra. Its local and national politics were directly linked to its hold over the Ministry of Oil. Its local officials were involved with oil smuggling on a massive scale. Basra had many disputes over militias running its police force. Other ministries, too, have become sectarian-political fiefdoms with a deadly mix of corruption, organized crime and local militias as ministries' police. **The result is an entrenched system of illicit benefits packaged in ethno-religious politics. Dismantling organized crime and political mafias is essential in restoring a functioning state.**

One most important and urgent issue in state building is the ability to control armed groups and exert authority all over Iraq. The government has to negotiate disarming militias whose loyalties, ethnic, religious or political, to their leaders rise above their loyalty to the state. The top three militias are Kurdish Peshmerga who are the best trained and disciplined, the Shia Bader brigade with its extended networks of social organizations, and the Mehdi Army, the least organized and most thuggish. **Integrating members of these groups into Iraqi units must come through rigorous selection and training procedures. Alternative long term proposals,**

such as empowering irregular armed groups and militias to deliver local security, will undermine the authority of the state and prolong criminal and sectarian violence.

The US should continue to be involved in security planning and not implementing. It should bear its political influence to ensure a buy-in from all parties to Iraq's national security policies. In confronting complex networks of kidnappers, smugglers, white collar criminals and financiers of armed groups and political parties, Iraq needs the US' advanced technical support and expertise. **Iraq also needs to revive its own security agencies and measures that were effective in fighting crime under the previous regime.** For example, the previous regime ran a successful undercover security agency to expose white collar corruption in all ministries.

Lowering Expectations

Americans and Iraqis have lowered their expectations and are more focused on critical areas. **To an Iraqi citizen, the definition of success is simple: Life should be better now than what it was under Saddam. This translates into improved security, better basic services and a stable strong economy.** These indicators vary throughout Iraq. Life is worse in six provinces, including Baghdad, better in the three Kurdish provinces and with a long way to go in the rest of Iraq's nine provinces. With good management and follow up, the newly launched scheme of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), supported by the US government, should bring tangible results. Demonstrating such incremental success is essential to our overall success in Iraq.

At the national level, the challenges are more serious and cannot be resolved without addressing the political and security issues. The on-going electricity shortage is a case in point. Grids that are built during the day get knocked down at night, engineers are killed, electricity stations are bombed and, despite progress, Baghdad households have less power today than that under Saddam. Similarly, criminal networks and mafias in state ministries remain unchecked. Senior civil servants are killed every day. Universities and hospitals have lost hundreds of experts, doctors and academics to kidnappers and criminals. Iraqi police have lost thousands in fighting the insurgency. In its fight against corruption, Iraq's Commission for Public Integrity lost more than 20 judges and investigators to assassinations. **Central government cannot run without better security.**

Summary

In closing, I want to stress that **security, government and politics are closely intertwined, feeding each other with failures and successes.** By advancing the political process further, Iraq will have better government and improved security. The National Strategy document rightly highlights the need for continued integrated effort on political, security and economic tracks.

Although economic success at the central and national level is subordinate to achieving security, effective government and an inclusive political process, there is much that can be done under the current conditions.

The key to success is in better political management. Recent Sunni participation in the elections and government paid dividends in exposing Zarqawi and forming a government of national unity. Now, the spread of sectarian violence threatens the political process and Iraq's fragile unity government.

Iraq has a long way to go in fighting crime, ending political violence, eliminating sectarian killings and uprooting terrorism. Violence is now a scourge run by gangs and militias in Baghdad's streets and districts. **The fight to end the insurgency can only succeed if it becomes a shared goal in the self interest of the three communities.** The strength of the insurgency comes from the absence of government, the weakness of Iraqi intelligence, the weakness of police and security institutions and a divided political leadership. Although there is little to negotiate about with the core elements behind the insurgency, through better politics, intelligence and targeted use of force the Iraqi government can reach out and dislodge most of their support networks. The past three years made it clear that this war cannot be won by force alone.

This Iraqi government has a long way to go before making any significant difference. It is in a race to consolidate a national unity government and a united parliament ahead of a full meltdown into violence and chaos. It needs help in both tracks: security and politics. While the US can no longer instruct the Iraqis on how to govern, the security of the government and the delicate balance among Shia, Sunni and Kurdish parliamentary blocs still hinge on US support. **This gives the US significant influence and leverage over the course of Iraqi politics and the development of its security.** Cautiously and with US help, Shias, Sunnis and Kurdish leaders have been moving slowly towards reconciliation. They need help to complete their journey.

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